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AUTHOR Zoerner, C. E., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

Business communications students who too often feel themselves defeated from their previous attempts to learn to write need to be shown how to take the painful pressure off writing and how to learn written communication by using feedback. Six specific steps which may be followed in helping students cope with feelings of failure are: letting them know that the teacher understands their feelings, letting them know that they are not alone in their defeat and pain, admitting that teachers can't teach them how to write (they can learn to teach themselves), showing them how to take as much pressure as possible off the writing process, providing them with the feedback they need to learn written communication, and sparing them from final disappointment. (JM)

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This article views the beginning business communications student as believing himself to be defeated in his past attempts to learn to write and suggests methods to cope with his feelings of failure.

Teaching the Vanquished to Write

C. E. ZOERNER, JR.
California State University–Northridge

THE JOB OF a business communications teacher in the mid-1970's is like the job of President Andrew Johnson after the Civil War: we deal with legions of the vanquished and our chief problem is reconstruction.

Our students are the vanquished because they have lost the war of learning to write, and they accept their defeat.

Their first battle began in elementary school. Ft. Sumter was first grade. The pupils opened fire with some hope and enthusiasm about learning to write. The odds against the pupils were about 28 to 1. That is, for every 28 pupils there was but one teacher. Before ever entering junior high school, many of these pupils had met defeat, their Shiloh. The prospects for victory had looked bright. They should have won. But in the end, they didn't.

The next battlefield was junior high school. A few students could communicate with a written word, but they were exceptional. Junior high became their Gettysburg, a decisive loss. The odds in the battle were about 180 to 1. Their teachers had about 180 student contacts per day.

The next battleground was high school. If junior high was Gettysburg, then high school was Sherman's march to the sea, an avenue of annihilation. All throughout high school the odds were about 200 to 1.

The last battlefield was the college freshman composition course. This course was like Richmond, a catastrophe just before the end. In this battle, the odds against the students were a mere 100 to 1. By the time they finished this course, they were at Appomattox Court House, their swords offered in total surrender. They now were fully vanquished. The only thing left was to accept defeat. And we meet them in business communications courses only a year or so later.

In the upper division, the battleground becomes a prison camp. By this time the vanquished are bitter, shaking their heads at the irony of having chosen a discipline that requires a writing course beyond the basic requirement of the university. The vanquished know the war is over. To them our classes might as well be the Rock Island Prison Camp. Many decide to bear

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the prisoner's life by ignoring the prison. They devote their attention to other courses – courses in which little or no writing is required.

Though many try to ignore the prison camp, still others try to escape. They hope that if they complain long enough, and loud enough, and to the right people, they will be able to make it over the wall. They accuse their jailers of atrocity. They complain of the "irrelevance" of the course. Educational carpetbaggers – those eager to feed on the defeat of the vanquished – try to convert the complaints into rationales for dropping the communications requirement and enlarging different parts of the curriculum.

The vanquished struggle through our prisoner of war camps against high odds – anywhere from 50 to 100 to 1. Those odds are against the reconstruction – against giving the vanquished hope and a fresh start – against us, as well as the vanquished.

The ratio of student to teacher fires the cannonball that kills or wounds every student who ever walked into our business communications classes. Over the decades, the ratio has produced the legions of the vanquished.

The vanquished come into our classes with recognizable battle scars from the war they've been through. These battle wounds prevent the vanquished from taking up arms again in our classes. The wounds are in the form of self-destructive lessons the vanquished have learned during the war. Just a few of them follow:

You, the teacher, are the hated conqueror.
Writing is painful.
All writing is to the teacher.
Length is quality.
Work equals quality.
Big, ambiguous, obscure words are best.
Writing and written communication are the same thing.

Given these wounds how can we ever accomplish a reconstruction of the students' devastated confidence? The problems seem as great as the ones that faced President Andrew Johnson.

STEPS TO RECONSTRUCTION

There are at least six steps in the reconstruction – in teaching the vanquished to write. These six steps were formulated in direct response to the problems of vanquished, the nature of their defeat, and to the battle scars that they bear.

They are

1. Letting the students know that we understand how they feel,

2. Letting them know that they are not alone in their defeat and pain,
3. Admitting that we can't teach them to write,
4. Showing them how to take as much pressure as possible off the writing process,
5. Providing them with the feedback they need to learn written communication, and
6. Sparing them from a final disappointment.

Step one: The distance between us and the vanquished is farther than that between a soldier and his officers. To overcome the distance, early in the semester have the students write anonymous papers about problems they have with writing. After you read them, you may want to spend an hour showing the vanquished you understand exactly how they feel. You may have a firmer grasp of why they feel defeated than they do. You will begin to look to them less like a conqueror and warden and more like a teacher.

Step two: If you write, and you probably wouldn't be reading this if you didn't, let the students know that you share with them many of the pains, frustrations, and fears about writing. Tell them how their problems are all but universal.

Incredibly, some of the vanquished think that they alone have problems with writing. They freely discuss their distaste for writing among themselves, but they never reveal their actual fear and dread. To their peers, some of the vanquished try to look brave in the face of defeat. Some try to pretend they write easily and well, and this makes them all the more lonely and isolated.

Stressing the universality of the problem almost always tends to relax the unbelievable tension their defeat has produced.

Step three: Admitting to the vanquished that you can't teach them to write catches them off guard. They suspected you couldn't, but they never expected you to say such a thing. While they're off balance, tell them you can show them how to teach themselves.

This approach seems fresh. Some of the vanquished begin to respond, begin to strain against the shackles they've come to accept. This isn't the same old battleground that always brought defeat, and maybe this isn't a prison camp after all.

Stress that it's questionable that writing can be taught at all, no less by someone with the teaching load and university duties you have. But stress that writing can be learned. Anyone who can write has learned.

Step four: Before they recover, tell them that everyone in the class can already write well enough to achieve written communication. Because of the years of pain and frustration, they won't believe you.

So explain that your class is about communication, written communication in particular, and that the process of written communication is divided into three stages: what you do before you start to write, what you do while writing, and what you do after you finish writing. Emphasize that the writing stage is successful if the writer can roughly capture his ideas and information on the paper. If later the writer can understand what he meant, then the writing is good enough.

This starts taking pressure off the writing stage, a pressure that has become unbearable to the vanquished. This pressure in the past has kept them from getting started, kept them from continuing, and made them assure that a first draft is written communication.

Emphasize that the process of written communication begins with a need, the need of the reader, and ends in the mind of a reader. Writing is but a step in the entire process, a necessary, but by no means the most important step. Show the students that the real payoff in terms of reader understanding comes from the time spent before the writing and the time spent after the writing. Pain and pressures have made writing a fragile time for the vanquished.

But preparation time is not fragile to them. It is solid time in which they can plan, gather information, make notes, and organize. None of this is as painful as writing time.

So show the vanquished how to be prepared before they start to write. Show them how to analyze the situation and discover what the reader will need. Show them how to gather and organize relevant information, and how to plan the message. Mention that being prepared capitalizes on laziness because one minute in preparation can save ten later.

The vanquished will begin to gain confidence because one of their main problems is that they try to write before they have any idea of what they're talking about. They try to plan, organize, think of facts, and write all at the same time, and they can't.

Now show them that once they have gathered and organized all the information the reader needs, they can write as fast as they can, using their copying and paraphrasing skills to transcribe information from their notes onto the paper. Emphasize to them that all they should be thinking about while writing are words that will roughly capture the content of their notes.

Stress that mechanics must not be considered at all during the tumult of writing, but will be considered later in tranquility. Emphasize that mechanics are not writing skills at all, that thinking of grammar, spelling, and punctuation at that fragile time is like volunteering for a suicide patrol. The vanquished can write secure in the knowledge that later they will come back to make the words communicate with a reader.

The vanquished should have a clear idea that they can write and that they can communicate with written words, but not at the same time.

Finally, show the vanquished how to revise, how to check the written message against their original analysis of the reader's needs. Show them how to edit carefully, to bring all their reading skills – though these are declining sharply – into play. Show mechanical errors as obstacles to readers. Show how faulty mechanics hide the content from a reader. Remark that anyone who demands to be judged on the content of the message and not at all on the mechanics is either a Utopian dreamer or ignorant of the process of written communication.

Have students prepare their own lists of most frequent mechanical errors so that they can make sure that none of these favorites remain in their final drafts. Show how revision and editing make the words communicate to a reader.

Show the vanquished how to pretest a message, how to use substitute readers to find out if the message will work, before the message is ever sent out into the world to do its job.

Step five: Provide the vanquished with feedback, because only with feedback, knowing what's happening in a reader's mind, will they ever learn written communication.

No baby would ever learn to speak unless adults provided him with feedback about his message, because feedback is information about the effectiveness of the message. Just as surely, students need feedback to learn written communication.

But with our class loads and other duties how can we provide adequate feedback:

There seem to be at least two ways.

One way is to supply feedback on cassette tapes. Students submit tapes along with their papers, and as you read through the paper, you say on the tape what's going on in your mind as you read. Later the student takes the paper and tape and begins to learn what he did correctly and incorrectly, what worked and what didn't. You may have few enough students that this method will be possible for you.

Another way is to engage the students in a kind of feedback game. With this game they can teach themselves to write, or more accurately, to achieve written communication. This game overcomes many of the deadly lessons they've learned.

Have the students draw a simple figure on one sheet of notebook paper. On another sheet have them write instructions on how to draw the figure. Collect the original drawings and keep them, but give the instructions to students in your next class. Have the students in this class follow the instructions in drawing the figure on yet another sheet of notebook paper.

Then collect the material, making sure to keep each drawing with each set of instructions.

Now at your leisure, place the original drawing over the one produced by following the instructions. You may give a grade based on how well the produced drawing approximates the original one. This ease of grading makes possible many more assignments in one semester.

When the student gets back his original drawing, the instructions, and the drawing made from the instructions, he has a basis for beginning to learn written communication. He can compare what he intended the message to mean with what a reader thought it meant. He can look through the instructions and see where they worked and where they didn't.

You are largely removed from the scene, so the classic cry of the vanquished that the teacher somehow cheats them on every assignment becomes hollow indeed. Either someone could follow the instructions or he couldn't. This has nothing to do with whether the teacher "liked" the message or "didn't like" it. The implication always has been that the process by which teachers like or dislike something is quite mysterious.

Playing the feedback game, the students get crucial information about how to improve their written communication, especially if the next assignment is to revise the instructions and to try them again. The vanquished begin orienting to the reader. They begin to see first hand that the writing is on the paper, but the communication is in the mind of the reader. And when the revision improves the performance of the reader, they get a clearer idea that the time to make a message communicate is after it's written.

Of course, the students can continue this kind of practice in written communication long after they leave your classes.

The sixth step: Finally, toward the end of the semester try to spare the vanquished from another defeat. Tell them that you'd like to give A's to all those who tried and learned, because if they ever needed encouragement, this is the time. Those who improved their written communication to some extent might constitute the majority of the class.

The students know as well as you that this won't be possible. What a university does is give grades, and that means gradation. Not everyone will get an A because the system does not allow for it.

Besides not all the students have had enough time in one semester to improve to the point of deserving an A. They will, however, have time for further improvement in the future. They can continue using the methods you've shown them, especially the methods for preparing, writing, making the message communicate later, pretesting, and the feedback game. Their written communication can continue to improve even though the class is over.

For those who will continue to improve their written communication, the true victory lies ahead in the business world. Their lives will be easier because they'll be called upon often to write, and they've already learned to take the pressure off the process. And their careers will be more successful because they'll be able to communicate with a written word.

THE END OF THE ORDEAL

For our students, the war is over. Our classes can be prison camps, but they can also be a time of reconstruction, healing. The method outlined here is one possible way. The crux of the method is to show the students how to take the painful pressure off writing and how to learn written communication by using feedback.

Despite his efforts, Andrew Johnson is not considered a popular historical figure. But then neither are we popular. None of the recorded utterances of Andrew Johnson is considered awe inspiring. But most of what we write is written in chalk, to be erased at the end of the hour.

So perhaps we best can understand these words of Andrew Johnson, spoken during the Reconstruction:

"Let peace and prosperity be restored to the land. May God bless this people..."